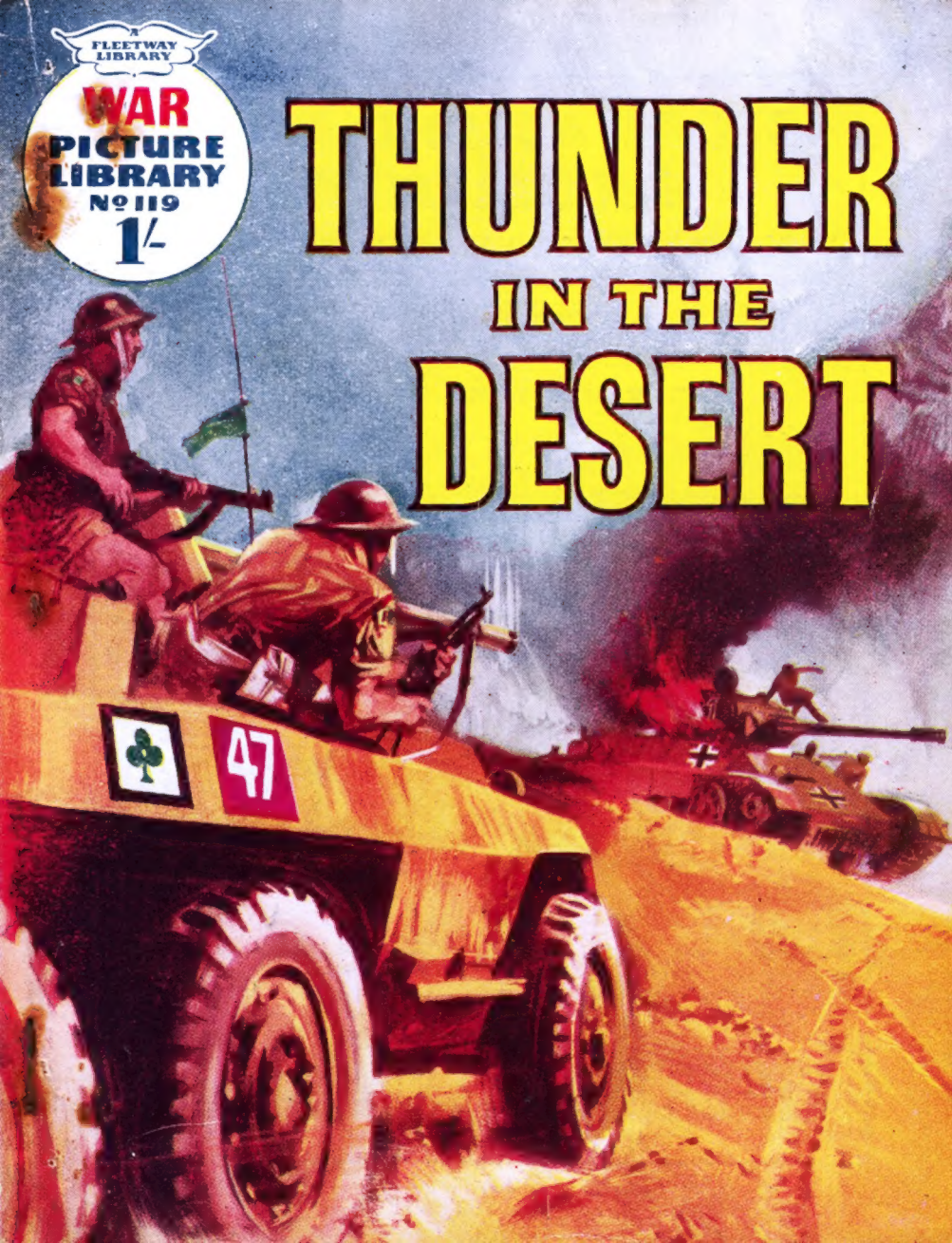
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THUNDER IN THE DESERT
47

SOCCER ACTION, SOCCER THRILLS . . .

FOLLOW THE FORTUNES OF TWO TRUE-TO-LIFE TEAMS AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE FOOTBALL LADDER OF FAME

ON SALE NOW :—

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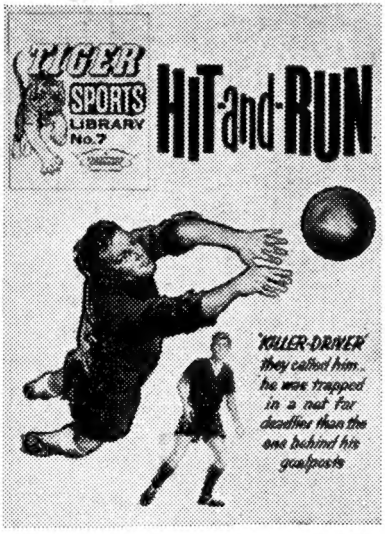
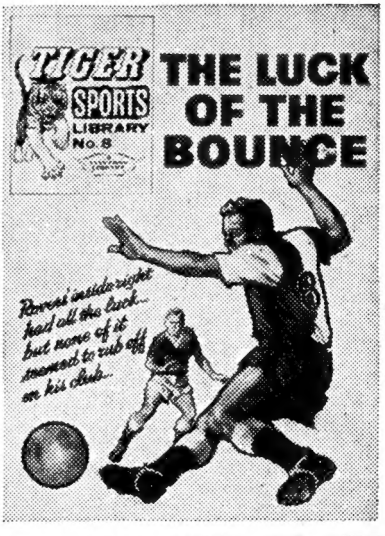


No. 7.—**HIT-AND-RUN.** Suspected of having knocked down a child in his powerful vintage sports car, Carford goalie, Ron Towers, faces a bleak future.



No. 8.—**THE LUCK OF THE BOUNCE.** A new star for the Rovers . . . but the star burns too bright for a small town like Bradmere . . .

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THUNDER IN THE DESERT

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Chapter 1. ACTION FRONT

THERE WERE SOME WHO LOOKED ON THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE WITH DISFAVOUR, THOUGH. THE COMMANDER OF THE ARMOURED BRIGADE WHO WAS IN CONSULTATION WITH A VISITING GENERAL WAS ONE...
I'M CONCERNED ABOUT THAT ENEMY FORCE THE DIVISIONAL SCOUT CARS REPORTED, SAM. IT COULD POSE A SERIOUS THREAT TO OUR LEFT FLANK. HAVE YOU ACTED ON MY DIRECTIVE YET?
I HAVE. THOUGH I'VE NO FAITH IN BENSON OR HIS SWANK REGIMENT.
BRIGADIER SAM COLLINS WAS IN THE ORIGINAL TANK CORPS IN WORLD WAR ONE... HE HAD NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE WAYS OF PLUSHY CAVALRY UNITS ...
SEE THIS? IT'S A MEMO FROM BENSON. HE HAS TO TACK FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE ON TO HIS SIGNATURE... EVEN ON A MEMO! POMPOUS ASS!

AND THE BRIGADIER CERTAINLY HAD NO PATIENCE WITH THE WILLOWY UPPER-CRUST TYPES WHO ABOUNDED IN THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE ...
YOU MUST BE MORE TOLERANT SAM. ANYWAY, WHATEVER YOU SAY, BENSON'S OUTFIT HAS A FINE TRADITION.
I'LL ADMIT HE'S BEEN HERE LONG ENOUGH TO GET THE FEEL OF OPERATING IN THE DESERT.
COLLINS MIGHT HAVE FELT HIS DOUBTS WERE WELL-FOUNDED HAD HE HEARD A DISCUSSION BETWEEN BENSON AND THE FENSHIRES' SECOND-IN-COMMAND, MAJOR GUY HANFORD. HANFORD, RIDING IN HIS TANK, HAD INSTRUCTED HIS DRIVER TO DROP BACK...
WHEN WE LEAGUER FOR THE NIGHT, WILL WE SET UP THE MESS-TENTS AS USUAL, COLONEL?
OF COURSE, GUY.

IN RADIO SILENCE THE FORMATION ROLLED SOUTH-WESTWARDS. IT HALTED AFTER SUNSET IN THE CHILL GLOOM THAT SUCCEEDED THE BROILING DAY...

THE MESS-TENTS WERE RAISED, AND WERE SOON CROWDED WITH OFFICERS AND MEN NOT ON DUTY...
JOHNNY, YOU WON'T HAVE ME WITH YOU AS A PASSENGER TOMORROW. I'LL BE TRAVELLING IN MY TANK. I ESTIMATE WE'LL MAKE CONTACT AROUND FOURTEEN HUNDRED HOURS.
THE JERRIES DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE IN FOR, COLONEL. YOU CAN BE SURE THE REGIMENT WILL DO A RATTLING GOOD JOB.

IN NO OTHER UNIT COULD SUCH FRATERNISATION BE FOUND. BUT THEN THE FENSHIRES WERE ALL MUCH OF A PATTERN. MAJOR HANFORD AND CORPORAL BLANE, FOR EXAMPLE... IN CIVILIAN LIFE THEY WERE PARTNERS IN THE SAME FIRM. THEY RODE TO HOUNDS TOGETHER, BELONGED TO THE SAME CLUBS...
A RATTLING GOOD JOB? APTLY PUT, JOHNNY. IT JUST ABOUT DESCRIBES THE CLATTER WE'LL MAKE IN OUR CRUSADERS WHEN WE GO FOR THE HUN.
OH, FOR THE DAYS OF A CAVALRY-CHARGE... THE POUNDING HOOVES INSTEAD OF THE RUMBLE OF SO MUCH SOULLESS HORSE-POWER...
WAS THAT VISION OF A CAVALRY-CHARGE OF FORMER DAYS IN COLONEL BENSON'S MIND AT FOURTEEN HUNDRED HOURS THE FOLLOWING DAY... WHEN THE ENEMY WAS SIGHTED IN A MILE-WIDE WADI? IT MUST HAVE BEEN, IN THE LIGHT OF WHAT HAPPENED!

THE COLONEL THOUGHT FIT TO MAKE A SHORT SPEECH OVER THE REGIMENTAL RADIO-NET. IT WAS A FIGHTING SPEECH ...
... OUR ORDERS WERE TO HARASS THIS ENEMY LONG-RANGE GROUP BY HIT-AND-RUN TACTICS BUT ITS STRENGTH HAS EVIDENTLY BEEN OVER-ESTIMATED. I PROPOSE WE ATTACK AND DESTROY IT!
WITH A CONCERTED GROWL THE CRUSADERS WALLOWED FORWARD ... AT TRIPLE-SQUADRON STRENGTH ...
GET READY, LEUTNANT! THEY ARE BEGINNING TO MOVE TOWARDS US!
JA, HERR HAUPTMANN... AND WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT THEY ARE MOVING INTO!

Thunder In The Desert

MEN THRILLED TO THAT VIBRANT WORD AS IT CARRIED TO THEM OVER THE REGIMENTAL RADIO-NET. ANOTHER MOMENT AND THE TANKS SURGED FORWARD CLANKINGLY. IRONMONGERY, BENSON SOMETIMES CALLED THEM, BUT THEIR 340-BHP ENGINES BUILT UP TO A TUMULTUOUS CRESCENDO THAT STIRRED HIM STRANGELY...

THE GAP BETWEEN THEM AND THE OBJECTIVE NARROWED RAPIDLY AS THEY SWEPT ON AT FLAT-OUT SPEED. THEIR BESA MACHINE-GUNS BEGAN TO SPRAY THE ENEMY SLIT TRENCHES ...
RANGE TWO HUNDRED METRES! AT THE COMMANDER IN THE LEADING TANK... ONE SHORT BURST... FEUER!

THE FAST STUTTER OF A SPANDAU WAS AS YET THE ONLY RESPONSE FROM THE GERMAN POSITIONS.
... ALL GUNNERS TO HOLD THEMSELVES IN READINESS TO SWITCH FROM BESAS TO TWO-POUNDERS AND ENGAGE THE ENEMY'S TRANSPORT.

THAT WAS WHEN THE BURST OF LEAD HIT THE C.O., QUENCHING FOREVER THE FIERY GLINT IN HIS EYE. POOR JAMES BENSON — OR WAS HE FORTUNATE TO BE SPARED THE SAVAGE SPECTACLE THAT ENSUED ...
AAAARGH!
THEY'VE GOT THE OLD MAN! THE COLONEL'S BEEN HIT! BY THUNDER, WE'LL HAVE THEIR BLOOD FOR THAT! WE'LL ...

GUY HANFORD'S IMPASSIONED WORDS OF MINGLED GRIEF AND ANGER TAILED AWAY AS THE GROUND BEYOND THE ENEMY SLITS WAS SUDDENLY DAPPLED WITH WICKED FLASHES...
THE LEADING CRUSADERS IN THAT RECKLESS FRONTAL ATTACK WERE BLUDGEONED TO A DEAD HALT BY THE FIRST SHATTERING SALVO...
THEY'VE AMBUSHED US! GUNNER, WE'LL TAKE A SMACK AT ONE OF THOSE A.T. WEAPONS. RANGE, SEVEN HUNDRED... LARGE CLUMP OF CAMEL'S THORN...

HANFORD KEPT HIS HEAD. WITH COMMENDABLE COOLNESS, HE COMPLETED HIS FIRE ORDER. BUT THE LITTLE TWO-POUNDER WAS NOT UP TO DEALING WITH ANY OF THOSE KILLER-GUNS...
HIGH EXPLOSIVE WAS THE ANSWER TO THEM. A CRUSADER'S TWO-POUNDER WAS DESIGNED SOLELY FOR ARMOUR-PIERCING SHOT. NEVERTHELESS, HANFORD'S GUNNER BANGED OFF THREE OF THOSE SOLID SHELLS...
THAT'S IT, RALPH, OLD BOY! SLAP ANOTHER ONE IN!
ALL THREE SHOTS WERE INEFFECTUAL. THE WIRELESS-OPERATOR-LOADER WAS RAMMING A FOURTH INTO THE BREECH WHEN HANFORD'S TANK WAS HIT AGAIN...

A MONSTROUS CLANG... AND A BONE-JARRING SHOCK AS YET ANOTHER HIGH-VELOCITY SHELL SLAMMED IN, THIS TIME BEHIND THE GUN TURRET...

THE MAJOR'S CRUSADER STARTED TO BREW UP. HE SHOUTED TO HIS DRIVER... HIS GUNNER AND WIRELESS OPERATOR WERE PAST HEARING OR CARING...
BALE OUT!

GUY HANFORD SPILLED FROM THE CUPOLA WITH A TOMMY-GUN, AN ITEM IN EVERY TANK COMMANDER'S EQUIPMENT...
WE'RE NOT LICKED YET!
YOU BET WE'RE NOT, MAJOR!

ON EVERY HAND, ARMOURED VEHICLES WERE ERUPTING FLAME, OR LYING ASKEW AND CRIPPLED. MAJOR HANFORD WAS FIGHTING MAD...
COME ON, YOU CHAPS! FOLLOW ME!

HE WAS BENT ON LEADING A RUSH TOWARDS THE ENEMY POSITIONS. THE PURPOSE WAS VALIANT, BUT FORLORN... AND IT WAS NEVER PUT INTO PRACTICE, FOR THE AFRIKA KORPS INFANTRYMEN LET RIP WITH A TEMPEST OF SMALL-ARMS' FIRE...

MEANWHILE, THE GERMAN ANTI-TANK GUNNERS WERE STEPPING-UP THEIR RATE OF FIRE. RUTHLESSLY, THEY SAVAGED THE REMAINING CRUSADERS; EVERY LAST ONE WAS HAMMERED INTO HELPLESSNESS...
NO PRISONERS! WE CANNOT AFFORD TO BURDEN OURSELVES WITH THEM. IF ANY OF THE CREWS ATTEMPT TO CLIMB OUT, SHOOT THEM DOWN!

TO ADD TO THE CARNAGE, FLAME-WREATHED IRONCLADS BURST ASUNDER LIKE GIGANTIC BOMBS... AS TONGUES OF FIRE TOUCHED OFF THE AMMUNITION STACKED INSIDE THEIR HULLS AND TURRETS...
AAAAH!

SMOKE ROLLED ACROSS THE WADI WHERE THAT TRAGIC ONE-SIDED BATTLE HAD BEEN STAGED. ENVELOPED IN IT, MAJOR GUY HANFORD FOUND HIMSELF SEEMINGLY ALONE WITH THE DEAD...
THE SHOOTING HAS STOPPED... BECAUSE THERE'S NOTHING LEFT TO SHOOT AT... NOT AS FAR AS THE GERMANS ARE CONCERNED / THE REGIMENT'S BEEN MASSACRED...

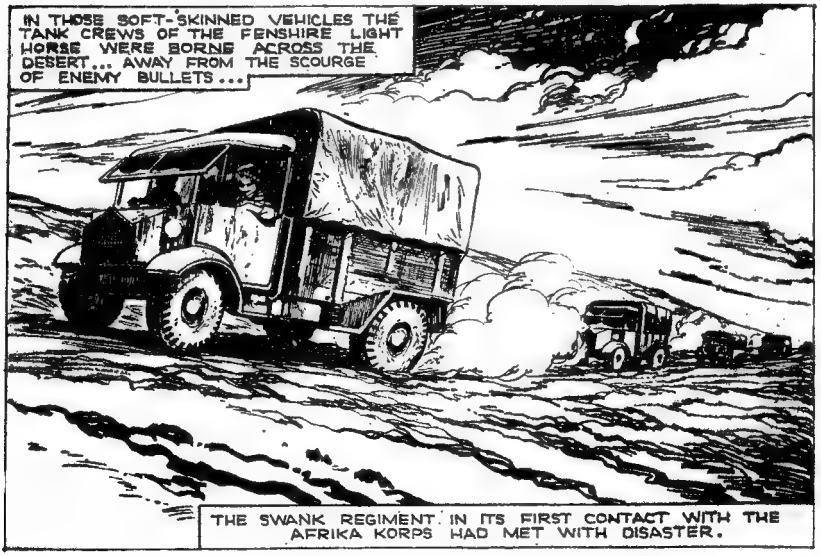
IN BITTERNESS AND SORROW HE STARTED BACK THROUGH THE ACRID CLOUDS. AND SAW THAT THOUGH MANY OF HIS FRIENDS AND COMRADES HAD PERISHED, A LARGE NUMBER HAD ESCAPED...

TO HANFORD, IT SEEMED LIKE THE HISTORIC CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE ALL OVER AGAIN. ONLY, HE WAS TOO LOYAL TO ADMIT HIS COLONEL HAD BLUNDERED... AND HAD LED THE REGIMENT TO DISASTER.
NOT A SINGLE TANK LEFT! EVERY ONE OF 'EM WRITTEN OFF IN OUR FIRST ACTION... AS A REGIMENT THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE ARE FINISHED!
DON'T SAY THAT! WE'VE LOST ALL OUR ARMOUR BUT WE'VE STILL ENOUGH MEN LEFT TO RE-FORM INTO A UNIT.

AS IF IN CHALLENGE TO HIS WORDS, THERE WAS A SUDDEN SNAPPING AND SPLATTERING OF BULLETS!..

NAZI MARKSMEN HAD MOVED FORWARD TO HARRY THEM IN THEIR WITHDRAWAL. UNABLE TO RETALIATE WITH THEIR SHORT-RANGE PISTOLS AND TOMMY-GUNS, THEY WERE EASY TARGETS FOR THE GERMANS...

THE REGIMENT'S TRANSPORT CAME TO THE RESCUE. IT SWEPT INTO THE WADI TO PICK UP THE SURVIVORS OF COLONEL BENSON'S DEATH-OR-GLORY ENTERPRISE...
OVER HERE WITH THAT MAN ...QUICKLY!


IN THOSE SOFT-SKINNED VEHICLES THE TANK CREWS OF THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE WERE BORNE ACROSS THE DESERT... AWAY FROM THE SCOURGE OF ENEMY BULLETS...
THE SWANK REGIMENT IN ITS FIRST CONTACT WITH THE AFRIKA KORPS HAD MET WITH DISASTER.

Chapter 2. BREAK with TRADITION

BY PESTERING, THE BRIGADIER GAINED HIS POINT. IN CONSEQUENCE, TWO OFFICERS AND FORTY-FIVE MEN FROM A BATTLE-HARDENED INFANTRY UNIT REPORTED TO HIS HEADQUARTERS A WEEK LATER...
AH, CAPTAIN HOGAN, WECOME TO THE ROYAL ARMOURED CORPS. YOU AND YOUR MEN WILL JOIN A UNIT AT BENI YUSEF, IN THE NILE DELTA.

THE BRIGADIER ADDRESSED THE DETACHMENT...
...YOU'LL BE JOINING A REGIMENT THAT PRIDES ITSELF ON ITS TRADITIONS. BUT DON'T BE OVERAWED BY THEM.

LATER, SAM COLLINS WATCHED THEIR DEPARTURE. THERE WAS A THOUGHTFUL EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE.
THEY SEEM A TOUGH LOT. JUST THE KIND TO SHAKE UP THE FENSHIRES ... IF THAT IS POSSIBLE. I LIKE THE LOOK OF THAT FELLOW HOGAN, TOO.

BENI YUSEF WAS ONE OF THE MANY CAMPS DOTTED AROUND CAIRO. HERE THE FENSHIRES WERE NOW ESTABLISHED, AWAITING REFITTING AND REINFORCEMENTS...
GREAT SCOTT! IS THIS THE SCRUFFY CREW THAT'S BEEN WISHED ON US, GUY? IF COLONEL BENSON WERE ALIVE TO SEE THEM, HE'D THROW A FIT!

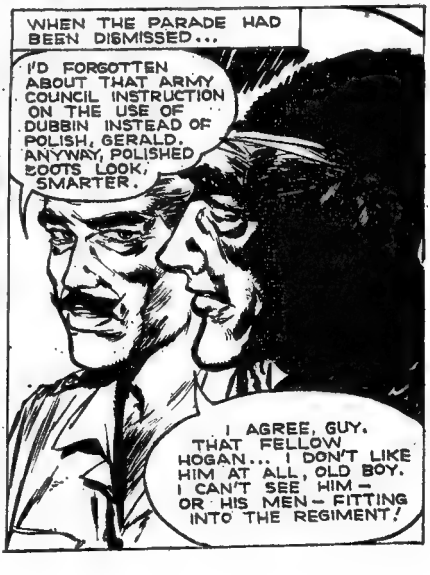
MAJOR GUY HANFORD INTRODUCED HIMSELF AND MAJOR COURTENAY TO CAPTAIN HOGAN, THE INFANTRY OFFICER. THE MANNER OF THE TWO MAJORS WAS STIFF AND FORMAL... IN COMPLETE CONTRAST TO THAT OF HOGAN. HE WAS BY NATURE RUGGEDLY GENIAL.
...I AM ACTING AS COMMANDING OFFICER. THIS IS MAJOR COURTENAY, WHO I HOPE WILL BECOME MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND.
GLAD TO KNOW YOU, SIR. BY THE WAY, MY FIRST NAME IS MIKE...
THESE MEN YOU'VE BROUGHT WITH YOU, HOGAN, SEEM A SHODDY-LOOKING CROWD, I MUST SAY!

MIKE HOGAN WAS ANGERED BY COURTENAY'S AIR OF DISDAIN...
WE'VE JUST COVERED FOUR HUNDRED MILES OF DUSTY DESERT ROAD, AND BEFORE THAT WE'D BEEN CONTINUOUSLY IN ACTION FOR TWO DAYS...
THAT'S ENOUGH, CAPTAIN HOGAN!

MIKE BOTTLED UP HIS TEMPER.. AND HE HAD TO DO SO AGAIN LATER, WHEN HE AND HIS CONTINGENT PARADED WITH THE FENSHIRES AFTER THEY HAD HAD A CHANCE TO MAKE THEMSELVES PRESENTABLE...
JUST TAKE A LOOK AT THEIR BOOTS, MAJOR HANFORD. THEN COMPARE THEM WITH THOSE OF OUR OWN MEN.

HANFORD SINGLED OUT TWO MEN TO DEMONSTRATE THE DIFFERENCE COURTENAY HAD POINTED OUT...
YOU SEE WHAT MAJOR COURTENAY MEANS, CAPTAIN HOGAN?
I DO INDEED, SIR. BUT WE WERE FORBIDDEN TO POLISH OUR BOOTS AND ORDERED TO PRESERVE THE LEATHER BY GREASING WITH DUBBIN. I UNDERSTOOD THAT INSTRUCTION HAD BEEN ISSUED TO ALL UNITS.

HANFORD AND COURTENAY FLUSHED AT HOGAN'S LAST REMARK... AND WENT ON WITH THE INSPECTION...
STUFFED SHIRTS! ESPECIALLY THAT COURTENAY! BUT THEY'LL GET NO CO-OPERATION FROM ME... NOT IF THEY GO ON MAKING UNJUSTIFIABLE COMMENTS ABOUT MY MEN AND THEIR TURN-OUT.

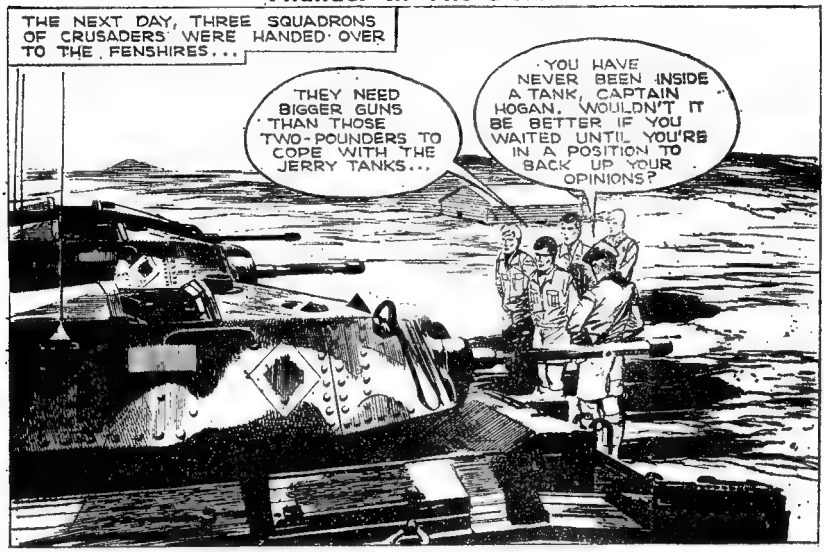

WHEN THE PARADE HAD BEEN DISMISSED...
I'D FORGOTTEN ABOUT THAT ARMY COUNCIL INSTRUCTION ON THE USE OF DUBBIN INSTEAD OF POLISH, GERALD. ANYWAY, POLISHED BOOTS LOOK SMARTER.
I AGREE, GUY. THAT FELLOW HOGAN... I DON'T LIKE HIM AT ALL, OLD BOY. I CAN'T SEE HIM — OR HIS MEN — FITTING INTO THE REGIMENT!

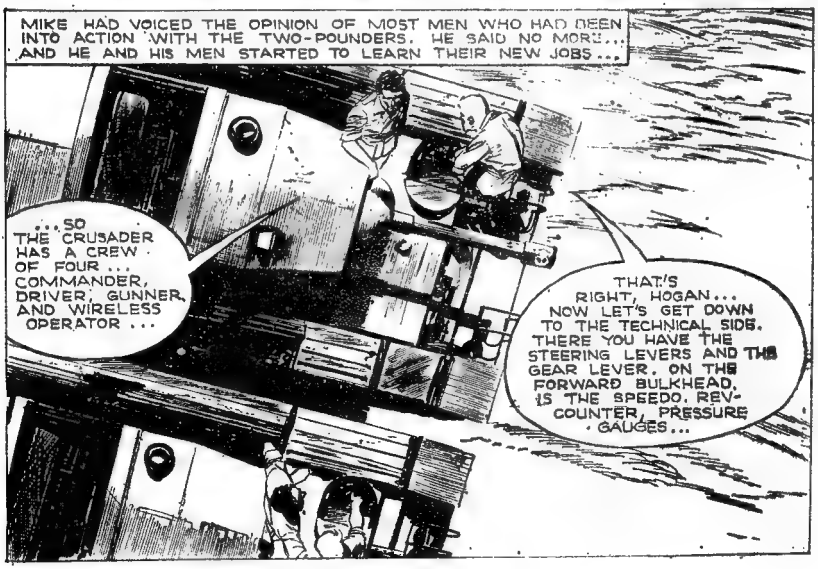
THAT SAME EVENING, THE INFANTRYMEN WERE INTRODUCED TO THE FENSHIRE'S CUSTOM OF OFFICERS AND MEN SHARING THE SAME MESS...
THIS IS A RUM DO, SIR. I DON'T FEEL RIGHT, BEING HERE WITH YOU AND LIEUTENANT ELDRIDGE.
WELL, IT'S A HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD TRADITION OF OUR NEW REGIMENT, SERGEANT RANDALL. YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO TRY TO GET USED TO IT.

BUT WHILE MOST OF THE INFANTRYMEN WERE FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE, OTHERS WERE OVERSTEPPING THE BOUNDS OF FAMILIARITY...
I WAS TOLD YOU WERE THE MESSING OFFICER. WHAT TIME'S MONGEE?
MONGEE?
YES... MONGEE... CHOW... GRUB. HOW LONG DO WE HAVE TO WAIT BEFORE IT'S DISHED UP?

COURTENAY FLUSHED WITH ANGER...
WHO DO YOU THINK YOU'RE TALKING TO? IF YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY TO ME, ADDRESS ME IN THE PROPER MANNER... *UNDERSTAND?* AS IT IS, I DON'T HAPPEN TO BE THE MESSING OFFICER!
S-SORRY, SIR!
BLIMEY, HE'S RILED UP AND NO MISTAKE!

MAJOR HANFORD NOW REALISED THAT THE FENSHIRE'S TRADITION WOULD HAVE TO BE ABANDONED...
WE CAN'T HAVE A SCENE LIKE THAT HAPPENING AGAIN, COURTENAY. IN FUTURE THE OFFICERS AND MEN WILL MESS SEPARATELY.
YOU'RE RIGHT, GUY. I'LL TELL THE QUARTERMASTER TO MAKE THE ARRANGEMENTS.


THE NEXT DAY, THREE SQUADRONS OF CRUSADERS WERE HANDED OVER TO THE FENSHIRES...
THEY NEED BIGGER GUNS THAN THOSE TWO-POUNDERS TO COPE WITH THE JERRY TANKS...
YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN INSIDE A TANK, CAPTAIN HOGAN. WOULDN'T IT BE BETTER IF YOU WAITED UNTIL YOU'RE IN A POSITION TO BACK UP YOUR OPINIONS?

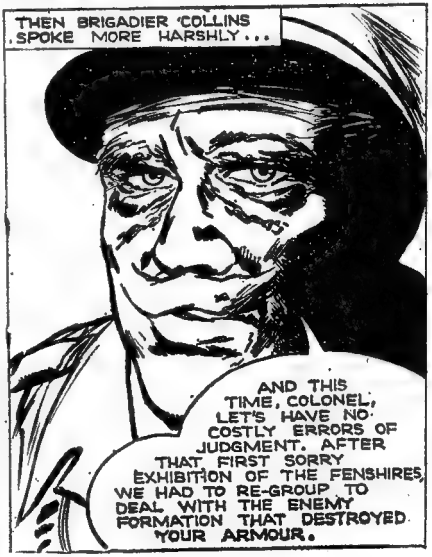

MIKE HAD VOICED THE OPINION OF MOST MEN WHO HAD BEEN INTO ACTION WITH THE TWO-POUNDERS. HE SAID NO MORE... AND HE AND HIS MEN STARTED TO LEARN THEIR NEW JOBS...
...SO THE CRUSADER HAS A CREW OF FOUR... COMMANDER, DRIVER, GUNNER, AND WIRELESS OPERATOR...
THAT'S RIGHT, HOGAN... NOW LET'S GET DOWN TO THE TECHNICAL SIDE. THERE YOU HAVE THE STEERING LEVERS AND THE GEAR LEVER. ON THE FORWARD BULKHEAD, IS THE SPEEDO, REV-COUNTER, PRESSURE GAUGES...

AFTER WEEKS OF INTENSIVE TRAINING, THE INFANTRYMEN HAD BECOME THOROUGH TANK-MEN, READY FOR ACTION. THEN ONE MORNING, IN MAJOR HANFORD'S OFFICE, MIKE RECEIVED A SHOCK...
MY APPOINTMENT AS COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE REGIMENT HAS FINALLY COME THROUGH, HOGAN.
CONGRATULATIONS, SIR, AND MAJOR COURTENAY... HE IS NOW SECOND-IN-COMMAND, I PRESUME...
ON THE CONTRARY, HOGAN ...YOU ARE!

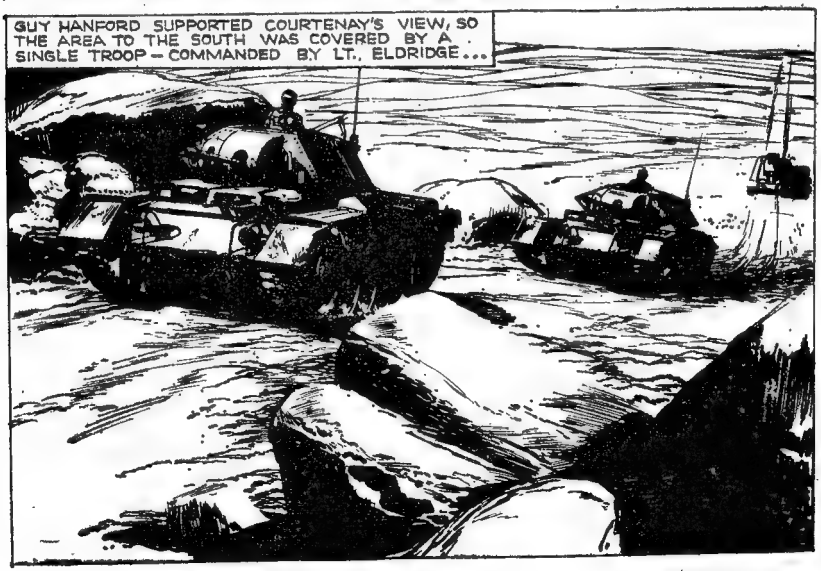
MIKE HOGAN WAS DUMBFOUNDED...
BUT, SIR... I-I CANNOT BELIEVE...
WELL, IT'S TRUE, HOGAN... BUT I WOULD LIKE TO POINT OUT THAT I WAS NOT CONSULTED. BRIGADIER-GENERAL COLLINS INSISTED THAT YOU SHOULD BE PROMOTED TO MAJOR AND MADE MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND.

COURTENAY STALKED OUT OF THE ROOM... AND MIKE FELT SORRY FOR THE LONG-SERVING FENSHIRE MAJOR.
IT'S HARD ON COURTENAY, SIR, SEEING THAT HE EXPECTED TO BE SECOND-IN-COMMAND. HE'S MORE QUALIFIED, SO WHAT IF I TURN DOWN THE APPOINTMENT?
IMPOSSIBLE, HOGAN! BESIDES, I DON'T THINK MAJOR COURTENAY WOULD CARE TO BE UNDER AN OBLIGATION.

IN ANOTHER WEEK THE FENSHIRES, FULLY-MANNED AND EQUIPPED, MOVED BACK TO THEIR BRIGADE AREA...
HANFORD, THE GERMANS AND ITALIANS ARE BUILDING UP FOR A BIG OFFENSIVE. YOUR UNIT WILL ACT AS A SCREEN, TO GIVE WARNING OF ANY ATTACK ON THIS SECTOR.


THEN BRIGADIER COLLINS SPOKE MORE HARSHLY...
AND THIS TIME, COLONEL, LET'S HAVE NO COSTLY ERRORS OF JUDGMENT. AFTER THAT FIRST SORRY EXHIBITION OF THE FENSHIRES, WE HAD TO RE-GROUP TO DEAL WITH THE ENEMY FORMATION THAT DESTROYED YOUR ARMOUR.

AND SO THE FENSHIRES MOVED OUT ACROSS THE DESERT, TO DEPLOY ITS ARMOUR TO ADVANCE POSITIONS AND SEND OUT RECCE PATROLS...
WON'T WE BE A LITTLE THIN ON THE GROUND TOWARDS THE SOUTH, COLONEL? FROM THE INFORMATION SUPPLIED TO US, I'D SAY THAT'S WHERE THE BIGGEST THREAT IS LIKELY TO DEVELOP.
I DON'T AGREE WITH HOGAN, GUY. IF THE ENEMY ATTACKS, I THINK HIS MAIN EFFORT WILL BE IN THE SECTOR FOR WHICH MY SQUADRON IS RESPONSIBLE.


GUY HANFORD SUPPORTED COURTENAY'S VIEW, SO THE AREA TO THE SOUTH WAS COVERED BY A SINGLE TROOP — COMMANDED BY LT. ELDRIDGE...

AT NOON THAT DAY, ELDRIDGE HALTED HIS TROOP...
WHILE YOU OTHERS ARE FEEDING, WE'LL GO ON UP BEHIND THAT RIDGE AND KEEP WATCH ON THE GROUND AHEAD.
OKAY, SIR.
TWO SERGEANTS GLANCED AFTER ELDRIDGE'S CRUSADER AS IT RUMBLED FORWARD. THEY WERE... SERGEANT BERT RANDALL, TOUGH EX-INFANTRYMAN, A BRICKLAYER BEFORE THE WAR... AND SERGEANT JULIAN TORRANCE, A CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT BEFORE HE HAD JOINED THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE.
ELDRIDGE TAKES HIS JOB SERIOUSLY, DOESN'T HE... IN SPITE OF HIS SLANGY LINE OF PATTER?

RANDALL GLARED AT TORRANCE.
MISTER ELDRIDGE IS A THUNDERING GOOD OFFICER. A DARN SIGHT BETTER THAN ANY OF YOUR TOFFEE-NOSED FENSHIRE LIEUTENANTS!
ALL RIGHT, OLD CHAP. KEEP YOUR WOOL ON. NO NEED TO GET WORKED UP!
TORRANCE STALKED OFF. HE FOUND IT HARD TO GET ALONG WITH RANDALL... AND THE REST OF THE EX-INFANTRYMEN.
IT'S FUNNY I SHOULD HAVE A CREW OF ROUGHS FROM RANDALL'S OLD UNIT... WHILE HE HAS THREE TRUE-BLUE FENSHIRES IN HIS TANK.
ELDRIDGE'S TANK WAS NOW BEHIND THE RIDGE. SUDDENLY THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT GAVE AN EXCITED SHOUT...
JERRIES! A WHOLE STRING OF 'EM!

HE WHISTLED UP, RANDALL, TORRANCE AND THEIR CREWS AND REPORTED BACK OVER THE RADIO, USING THE REGIMENTAL CODE-NAMES FOR THE DAY...
HELLO, FANO. KANA ONE CALLING. FIGURES TWO ZERO ENEMY ARMOURED CARS MOVING SOUTH-EAST OF MY PRESENT POSITION. IF A COUPLE MORE TROOPS COULD BE DIVERTED TO THIS AREA, WE COULD CUT THEM OFF. OVER.

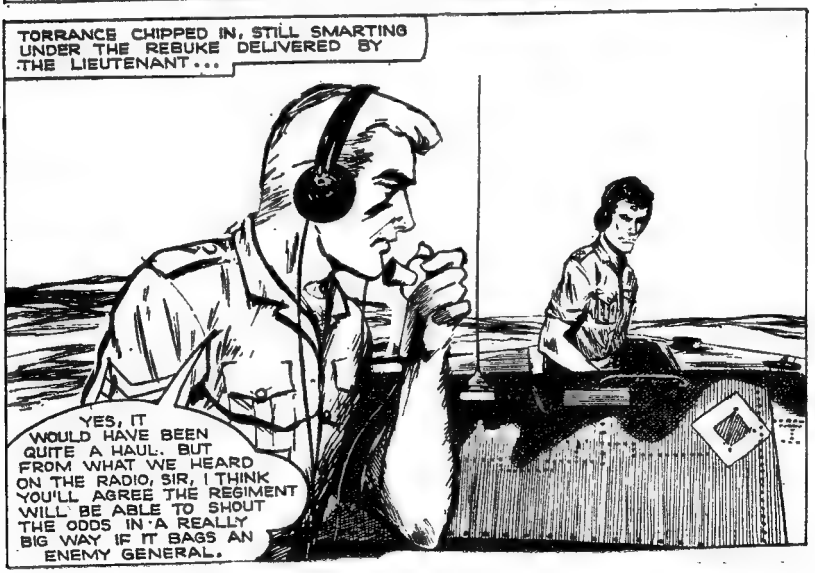
BUT ELDRIDGE'S MESSAGE WAS ALMOST COINCIDENTAL WITH ONE FROM MAJOR COURTENAY, ANNOUNCING THE APPEARANCE OF ENEMY VEHICLES ON HIS SECTOR AS WELL...
HELLO, FANO. BOMO CALLING CROSSING MY FRONT NOW IS A LARGE CONVOY OF TRUCKS AND ONE CARAVAN SIMILAR TO THOSE USED BY ITALIAN TOP BRASS. I SUGGEST YOU REINFORCE ME TO MAKE CERTAIN OF SECURING THIS CONSIDERABLE PRIZE. OVER.

AT REGIMENTAL HEADQUARTERS, GUY HANFORD WAS IMPRESSED AND INTRIGUED BY COURTENAY'S REPORT. BY COMPARISON, YOUNG ELDRIDGE'S NEWS SEEMED TRIFLING...
WHY NOT DETAIL TWO TROOPS TO CO-OPERATE WITH ELDRIDGE AS HE REQUESTS, COLONEL? AFTER ALL, TWENTY ARMOURED CARS...
NO, NO! I DON'T INTEND TO SPLIT MY FORCES. ELDRIDGE WILL HAVE TO SORT OUT HIS PROBLEM HIMSELF. WE'RE AFTER MUCH BIGGER GAME!

THUS THE YOUTHFUL TROOP COMMANDER ON THE SOUTHERN FLANK OF THE REGIMENTAL SCREEN WAS LEFT TO HIS OWN DEVICES... AND PROVED HIMSELF EQUAL TO THE OCCASION...
DRIVER, HALT! GUNNER, TWO-POUNDER ... TRAVERSE LEFT... ON... LEADING ENEMY SCOUT CAR... EIGHT FIVE ZERO YARDS ... FIRE!

THE GUN IN EACH TANK BARKED FEROCIOUSLY, FILLING THE TURRET WITH A HAZE OF DUST AND A BACK-BLAST OF CORDITE FUMES ...
SECOND ENEMY SCOUT-CAR... EIGHT FIVE ZERO YARDS! FIRE!
THIRD ENEMY SCOUT-CAR... EIGHT FIVE ZERO YARDS! FIRE!
SERGEANT TORRANCE! STICK YOUR STUPID HEAD DOWN! I NEED COMMANDERS IN MY TROOP... NOT DEAD HEROES!
TORRANCE COULD HEAR HIS CREW SNIGGERING AS HE SLID DOWN TO LOOK THROUGH HIS PERISCOPE ...
THESE OAFS ARE LAUGHING UP THEIR SLEEVES AT ME. CONFOUND ELDRIDGE FOR YAPPING AT ME LIKE THAT! ALL THE SAME, HE WAS RIGHT, DARN HIM!
THE FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD SCOUT-CARS WERE SWIFTLY KNOCKED OUT. THE OTHERS STARTED A FRANTIC RIGHT-ABOUT-FACE. THE LITTLE TWO-POUNDERS MIGHT BE AT A DISADVANTAGE AGAINST GERMAN TANKS AND DUG-IN GUNS, BUT LIGHTWEIGHT RECCE VEHICLES HAD NO ANSWER TO THEM ...

IN ALL, HALF A DOZEN OF THE AFRIKA KORPS VEHICLES TOOK A BATTERING THAT LEFT THEM DERELICT UNDER THE DESERT SUN ...
SIX OF 'EM BUSTED UP, MISTER ELDRIDGE! NOT BAD GOING!
NO, RANDALL. BUT WITH A LITTLE HELP WE COULD HAVE FORCED THE LOT TO SURRENDER WITHOUT A SHOT BEING FIRED.


TORRANCE CHIPPED IN, STILL SMARTING UNDER THE REBUKE DELIVERED BY THE LIEUTENANT ...
YES, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN QUITE A HAUL. BUT FROM WHAT WE HEARD ON THE RADIO, SIR, I THINK YOU'LL AGREE THE REGIMENT WILL BE ABLE TO SHOUT THE ODDS IN A REALLY BIG WAY IF IT BAGS AN ENEMY GENERAL.

Chapter 3. ONSLAUGHT

EAGERLY, LIEUTENANT-COLONEL GUY HANFORD WAS CONCENTRATING ALL HIS AVAILABLE FORCES TOWARDS COURTENAY'S LOCATION . . .

Thunder In The Desert

THE IMPOSING CONVOY SCREECHED TO A HALT. ANOTHER MOMENT AND IT WAS SWINGING ROUND, DRIVERS CRASHING THE GEARS, THEIR BOOTS HARD DOWN ON THE ACCELERATORS. IN CHAOS, THE WHOLE PROCESSION TOOK FLIGHT...

THE GUNS OF THE SQUADRON VOLLEYED... *AND THE DRIVERS OF THE ENEMY COLUMN PANICKED THE MORE!*

BUT COURTENAY'S SQUADRON SHOWED UP TO BLOCK THE ESCAPE ROUTE AND AT THE SAME TIME, LEADING ELEMENTS OF THE REGIMENT'S THIRD SQUADRON HOVE INTO SIGHT...
... FAN OUT TO ENCIRCLE THEM IN CASE THEY ATTEMPT TO TURN OFF THE ROAD AND BREAK WESTWARDS ACROSS THE DESERT!
GUY HANFORD HAD USED HIS FORCES TO GOOD PURPOSE. THE BRITISH ARMOUR NEATLY EXECUTED AN ENVELOPING MOVEMENT...
WE'VE GOT THEM! NOW TO PRESENT MY COMPLIMENTS TO THEIR PRECIOUS GENERAL, WHOEVER HE MAY BE!

WITH THE ITALIAN VEHICLES BUNCHED UP INSIDE A MENACING RING OF STEEL, HANFORD'S TANK MOVED IN TOWARDS AN ORNATE CARAVAN WHICH STOOD OUT SO IMPOSINGLY FROM THE TRUCKS.

NOWHERE WAS THERE ANY SIGN OF RESISTANCE. BUT AS YET, ONLY THE DRIVERS OF TRUCKS AND THE CARAVAN HAD ALIGHTED...
COME ON OUT AND DON'T TRY ANY TRICKS! WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

HANFORD'S VOICE DRIED UP. HIS MOUTH FELL OPEN. HIS EYES POPPED...
WHO... WHO THE DICKENS ARE YOU? WHAT KIND OF A MASQUERADE IS THIS?

THE PAUNCHY CHARACTER IN THE CARAVAN WAS CLAD IN A BRIGHTLY-COLOURED MEDIEVAL COSTUME. HE BABBLED AN ANSWER IN A VOICE THAT WAS FALSETTO WITH FEAR...
'DON'T SHOOT, SIGNOR! I AM CIVILIAN... I AM OPERA SINGER... TRAVELLING WITH MY FELLOW-ARTISTES AND OUR STAGE SCENERY AND PROPERTIES. I AM ANTONIO GIUSEPPE BENITO GIOVANNI.
WELL, BLOW ME DOWN! WE'VE CAPTURED AN ENSA CONCERT PARTY... OR ITS EYTIE EQUIVALENT! AND THIS ANTONIO MUST BE THE STAR TURN!

MIKE HOGAN WAS RIGHT. HANFORD HAD LAUNCHED A SORTIE IN FORCE AGAINST A COMPANY OF ITALIAN ENTERTAINERS...
AS FOR THE COSTUME, SIGNOR, WE OFTEN DRESS FOR OUR PARTS WHILE ON OUR WAY TO GIVE OUR PERFORMANCES. IT SAVES TIME...
WHY DID I LISTEN TO COURTENAY? WHY DIDN'T I TAKE HOGAN'S ADVICE? AT LEAST WE'D HAVE BAGGED A SCORE OF ARMOURED CARS TO OFF-SET THIS LUDICROUS LET-DOWN! NOW THE FENSHIRES WILL BE THE LAUGHING-STOCK OF THE WHOLE DESERT ARMY!

SURE ENOUGH, THE FENSHIRES BECAME THE BUTT OF HUGE MIRTH WHEN NEWS OF THEIR EXPLOIT WENT THE ROUNDS. BUT SAM COLLINS WAS NOT AMUSED. HIS MOOD WAS ONE OF DISGUST WHEN HE HAD A CHANCE TO DISCUSS THE AFFAIR WITH THE DIVISIONAL COMMANDER...

WHAT A BATTLE HONOUR FOR A FLASHY REGIMENT! THEY GO SWANNING ACROSS THE DESERT AND COLLAR AN OPERA COMPANY. NOT EVEN A GOOD OPERA COMPANY AT THAT!

OH? AND HOW DO YOU KNOW WHETHER THEY'RE GOOD OR BAD, SAM?

THE BRIG GRIMACED...

IN THEIR GRATITUDE FOR BEING WELL-TREATED THEY GAVE A PERFORMANCE HERE AT BRIGADE H.Q. BEFORE THEY WERE SENT OFF TO AN INTERNMENT CAMP. I TELL YOU, GENERAL, I'D RATHER LISTEN TO A BOMBARDMENT THAN THAT PACK OF SQUALLERS!

AS THOUGH TO LEND POINT TO THE BRIGADIER'S WORDS, THE AIR TREMBLED SUDDENLY TO THE MUTTER OF DISTANT GUNFIRE AWAY TO THE NORTH.

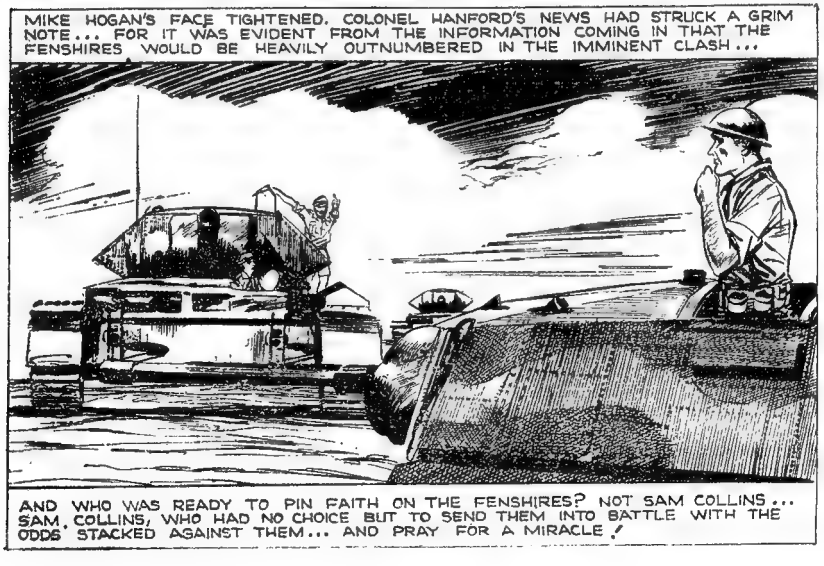
IN ALL SERIOUSNESS, GENERAL, I STRONGLY URGE THAT YOU DISBAND THE FENSHIRES!

NEVER MIND ABOUT THE FENSHIRES, SAM. D'YOU HEAR THAT GUNFIRE... THE BIG SHOW MUST HAVE STARTED! DRIVER... BACK TO DIVISIONAL H.Q.... HURRY!

THE NOISE OF GUNFIRE SPREAD TO OTHER SECTORS. THE FENSHIRES HEARD THE RUSTLE OF SHELLS BURNING THEIR WAY EASTWARDS ABOVE THEM AS THEY LOOKED OUT FROM THEIR ADVANCED POSITIONS.
LISTEN TO THE WHISPER OF THAT STUFF GOING OVER!
MOUNT UP, YOU MEN! I THINK I SEE MOVEMENTS IN THE HEAT-HAZE TO THE WEST.

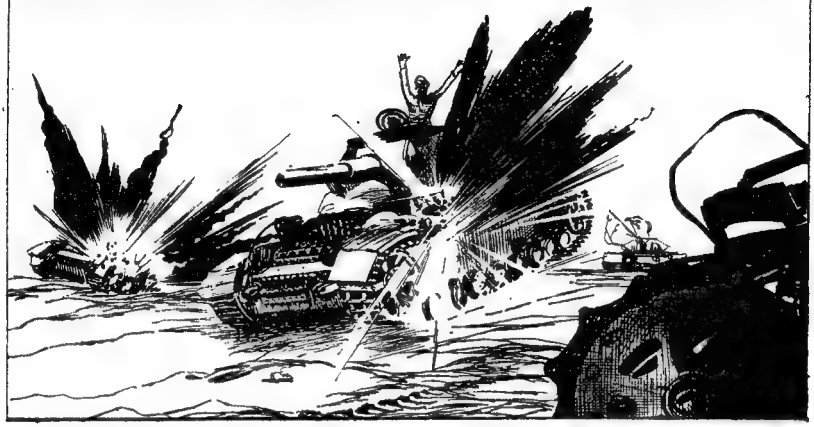
IT WAS INDEED GERMAN MARK III TANKS LUMBERING THROUGH THE HAZE, THE CLENCHED FISTS OF ROMMEL'S PANZER GRUPPE AFRIKA. BEHIND THEM ROLLED LORRY-BORNE INFANTRY...
DEUTSCHLAND, DEUTSCHLAND, UBER ALLES!..

GERMAN VOICES SINGING THE BATTLE-ANTHEM OF THE FATHERLAND CARRIED ACROSS THE DESERT. THE BRITISH FORWARD TROOPS NERVED THEMSELVES TO MEET THE ONCOMING THREAT...
WHAT'S THE WORD FROM BRIGADE, SIR? DO WE PULL BACK, OR FIGHT A HOLDING ACTION TILL REINFORCED?
WE FIGHT A HOLDING ACTION, HOGAN... BUT WITHOUT ANY HOPE OF SUPPORT. THE OTHER REGIMENTS IN THE BRIGADE ARE ALREADY COMMITTED ON OUR RIGHT FLANK!


MIKE HOGAN'S FACE TIGHTENED. COLONEL HANFORD'S NEWS HAD STRUCK A GRIM NOTE... FOR IT WAS EVIDENT FROM THE INFORMATION COMING IN THAT THE FENSHIRES WOULD BE HEAVILY OUTNUMBERED IN THE IMMINENT CLASH...
AND WHO WAS READY TO PIN FAITH ON THE FENSHIRES? NOT SAM COLLINS... SAM COLLINS, WHO HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO SEND THEM INTO BATTLE WITH THE ODDS STACKED AGAINST THEM... AND PRAY FOR A MIRACLE!

Chapter 4. The CAULDRON

THE TANKS OF BAKER SQUADRON WERE THE FIRST OF THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY THAT DAY. THEY HIT THE PANZERS AS THE NAZI IRONCLADS LUNGED INTO FULL VIEW OUT OF THE DESERT MIST...

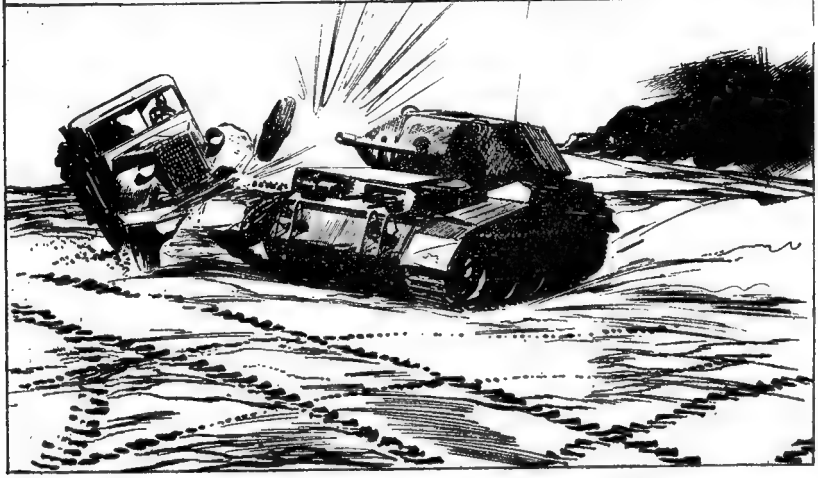


THE PANZERKAMPFWAGENS OUT-GUNNED THE CRUSADERS, BUT THE HAZE HAD ELIMINATED THE ADVANTAGE THE GERMANS POSSESSED IN RANGE. SWEEPING IN AT THEIR TOP SPEED, THE BRITISH TANKS BLUNTED THE ENEMY SPEARHEAD...

BAKER SQUADRON WAS UNDER COURTENAY'S COMMAND. THROUGH HIS PERISCOPE HE SAW A PANZER'S FIVE-MAN CREW TUMBLE FROM ITS HATCHWAYS AS A SHOT FROM HIS GUNNER PUNCHED INTO IT AND SET IT AFIRE...
DON'T OPEN UP ON THOSE JERRIES WHO'VE BALED OUT. WE CAN'T SHOOT DOWN MEN WHO AREN'T ABLE TO FIGHT BACK.
930

STIFF AND STARCHY... THAT WAS A PHRASE TO DESCRIBE COURTENAY. YET HE HAD PLENTY OF HUMANITY IN HIM, TOO. IGNORING THE FUGITIVES FROM THE KNOCKED-OUT ENEMY TANK AHEAD, HE FOCUSED ON THE LORRY-BORNE INFANTRY BEYOND IT...
STRAIGHT AS YOU GO, DRIVER. HERE'S WHERE WE TAKE A PLATOON OR SO OF PRISONERS... GUNNER, COVER THE MEN IN THAT TRUCK BUT DON'T FIRE UNLESS I SAY SO.

THE LORRY-LOAD OF NAZIS HAD NO MIND TO LAY DOWN THEIR ARMS, THOUGH. THE CRUSADER RUMBLED THROUGH A BLIZZARD OF LEAD TRIGGERED BY MEN SEEKING CHINKS IN HER ARMOUR. COURTENAY'S DRIVER CHANGED DIRECTION TO HEAD-OFF THE SWERVING TROOP-CARRIER... AND ENDED BY RAMMING IT...



THE SHOCK OF THE IMPACT CAPSIZED THE TRUCK AND SPILLED OUT ITS OCCUPANTS. THE CRUSADER STEAM-ROLLERED OVER THE FRONT OF IT AND CLOSE ON NINETEEN TONS OF TANK SQUASHED BONNET AND ENGINE INTO AN UNRECOGNISABLE MASS...

Thunder In The Desert

COURTENAY FELT ELATED, TRIUMPHANT. BUT HIS SENSE OF EXULTATION WAS SHORT-LIVED. A SUDDEN YELL OF ALARM JARRED THROUGH HIS EARPHONES...
MAJOR COURTENAY ... LOOK OUT! OVER BY THAT WADI!

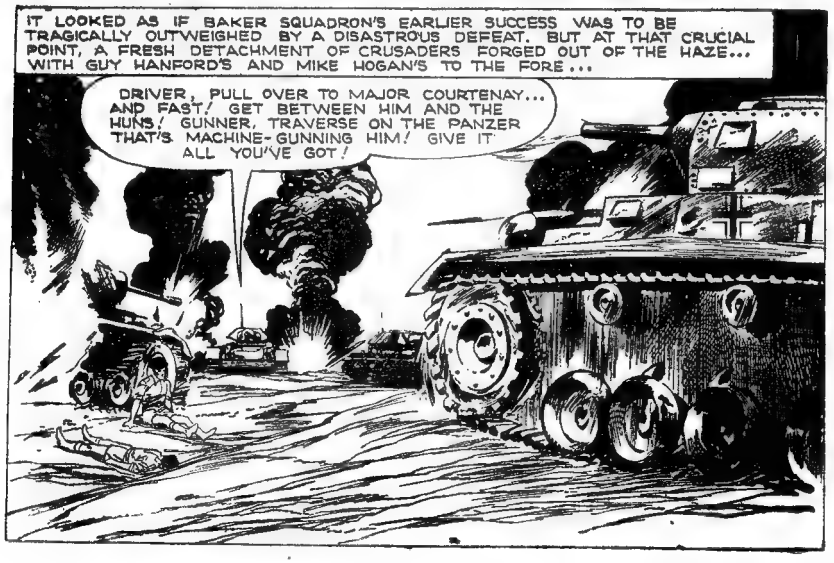
A COMBAT TEAM OF PANZERS AND ANTI-TANK GUNS HAD BEEN THRUSTING DUE WEST UNTIL THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE HAD REACHED IT. IT HAD CHANGED COURSE TO INVESTIGATE, CROSSING THE WADI UNOBSERVED IN THE MIST...

COURTENAY HEARD THE VICIOUS CRACK OF THE LEADING PANZER'S SEVENTY-FIVE ... AND A SPLIT-SECOND LATER, KNEW THAT HIS TANK WAS ITS TARGET.

THE CRUSADER JERKED TO A HALT WITH A SEVERED TRACK. A SITTING DUCK, SHE SHUDDERED TO THE DEAFENING SLAM OF ANOTHER SHOT THAT GOUGED HER FLANK. THE MAJOR GAVE THE ORDER TO BALE OUT AS A LICK OF FIRE ROSE UNDER HIM IN THE TURRET...

NAZI TRACER WHIPLASHED AMONG THE FOUR MEN FROM THE BURNING BRITISH TANK. A BURST CAUGHT COURTENAY IN THE LEGS AND SEEMED TO KICK THEM FROM UNDER HIM. HIS DRIVER, GUNNER AND WIRELESS OPERATOR WERE MOWN DOWN... TO DIE CRUELLY...

IT LOOKED AS IF BAKER SQUADRON'S EARLIER SUCCESS WAS TO BE TRAGICALLY OUTWEIGHED BY A DISASTROUS DEFEAT. BUT AT THAT CRUCIAL POINT, A FRESH DETACHMENT OF CRUSADERS FORGED OUT OF THE HAZE... WITH GUY HANFORD'S AND MIKE HOGAN'S TO THE FORE...



A SHOT BATTERED INTO THE GERMAN MARK THREE THAT WAS BEARING DOWN ON COURTENAY. ITS DRIVER AND CO-DRIVER WERE KILLED INSTANTLY. A SECOND SHOT SILENCED THE MACHINE-GUN IN ITS TURRET AND ANNIHILATED THE REST OF THE CREW...
ALL RIGHT, COURTENAY! I'LL BE WITH YOU IN A BRACE OF SHAKES!
HOGAN! I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE GLAD TO SEE HIM... BUT BY HEAVENS, I AM!

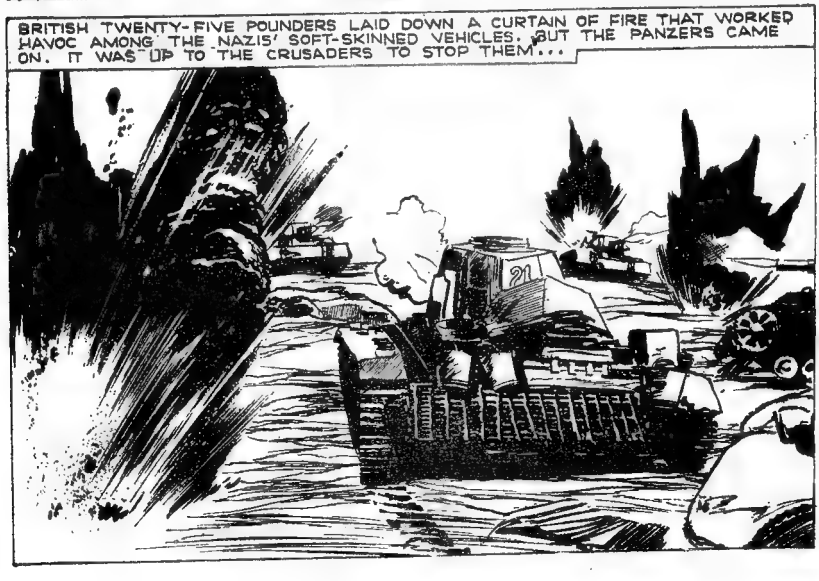
MIKE DROPPED TO THE GROUND AND HELPED THE WOUNDED MAN ABOARD. SICK WITH PAIN, COURTENAY LAY ON THE BACK OF THE EX-INFANTRY OFFICER'S TANK AS IT DREW AWAY...
THANKS, HOGAN... YOU GOT ME CLEAR JUST IN TIME! BUT DON'T STICK OUT HERE, MAN! YOU'VE A TANK TO COMMAND... AND MAYBE A REGIMENT, IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO GUY HANFORD!

NOTHING HAPPENED TO GUY HANFORD... NOT IN THAT ACTION, ANYHOW. BUT PLENTY HAPPENED TO THE GERMAN COMBAT-TEAM HE AND HIS HEAD-QUARTERS' SQUADRON HAD SURPRISED...

BETWEEN THEM THE TANKS OF H.Q. SQUADRON AND THE SURVIVING CRUSADERS OF BAKER SQUADRON SMASHED THAT GERMAN FORCE COMPLETELY...
ABLE SQUADRON HAS DRIVEN OFF THE ENEMY ON ITS FRONT... WITH RELATIVE EASE, IT SEEMS. COURTENAY'S WAS THE REALLY CRITICAL SECTOR.
POOR COURTENAY... HE'S BEEN BADLY SHOT UP. IT'LL BE A LONG TIME BEFORE HE'S BACK ON HIS TWO FEET AGAIN.

HANFORD WAS SILENT FOR A SPELL. WHEN HE SPOKE AGAIN, IT WAS FEELINGLY, THOUGH NOT WITHOUT AWKWARDNESS...
GERALD COURTENAY WOULDN'T BE ALIVE IF IT WASN'T FOR YOU. I'D LIKE TO SAY HOW MUCH I APPRECIATE WHAT YOU DID FOR HIM. HE'S A GOOD FRIEND OF MINE... AND I'M GRATEFUL TO YOU, MIKE...
MIKE, EH? GUY HANFORD'S NEVER CALLED ME BY MY FIRST NAME BEFORE.

IT WAS MIKE FROM THEN ON... THROUGH DESPERATE DAYS THAT SAW REPEATED ATTACKS BY A DETERMINED FOE... AND THE PILING UP OF A PRESSURE THAT TESTED MEN'S COURAGE AND STAMINA TO THE UTMOST...
DID YOU EVER SEE ANYTHING SO FANTASTIC, MIKE? THEY'RE THROWING IN EVERYTHING! AND WHAT A PASTING OUR ARTILLERY'S GIVING THEM!
THE ARTILLERY WON'T STOP 'EM, THOUGH! WE'RE GOING TO HAVE OUR WORK CUT OUT TO KNOCK THAT LOT BACK ON THEIR HEELS!


BRITISH TWENTY-FIVE POUNDERS LAID DOWN A CURTAIN OF FIRE THAT WORKED HAVOC AMONG THE NAZIS' SOFT-SKINNED VEHICLES. BUT THE PANZERS CAME ON. IT WAS UP TO THE CRUSADERS TO STOP THEM...
21

THE FENSHIRES HAD TO USE FINESSE TO OFFSET THE SUPERIOR GUN-POWER OF THE ENEMY IRON-CLADS. IT WAS AT MIKE'S SUGGESTION THAT THEY REMAINED IN HULL-DOWN POSITIONS TILL THE PANZERS WERE CLOSE UP TO THEM...
THERE'S NO DOUBT OF IT... I'M A BETTER COMMANDING OFFICER FOR HAVING MIKE HOGAN AS MY SECOND IN COMMAND. DASH IS ALL VERY WELL, BUT IT ONLY LEADS TO DISASTER.

YET MIKE WOULD HAVE BEEN FIRST TO ADMIT THAT WHERE HE MIGHT HAVE HELD HIS HAND IN AN EXCESS OF CAUTION, GUY WAS PRONE TO STRIKE OUT WITH TELLING EFFECT...
THE COLONEL SEEMS TO HAVE AN INSTINCT FOR HITTING BACK AT THE RIGHT MOMENT. IF I'D BEEN IN HIS SHOES I'D PROBABLY HAVE MISSED MY CHANCE BY STAYING PUT TOO LONG. BUT HE SENSED THE JERRIES WERE READY TO CRACK.

Thunder In The Desert

THE LINE WAS RESTORED FIVE MILES TO THE EAST... WITH THE FENSHIRES OCCUPYING A KEY SECTOR ON A PLATEAU...
MAJOR HOGAN HAS PROPOSED THAT WE LIE BACK FROM THE EDGE OF THE ESCARPMENT... WHICH I THINK IS A GOOD IDEA. AT THE SAME TIME, WE'VE GOT TO BEWARE OF THIS NARROW WADI THAT INTERSECTS OUR POSITION.

MINES WERE SOWN IN THE WADI. THAT NIGHT, GERMAN COMBAT ENGINEERS OPERATING IN GREAT STEALTH, TRIED TO LIFT THEM...
THIS WILL BE A LONG BUSINESS. THEY SEEM TO BE PLANTED THICKLY...
SH! KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN, KARL!

UP ON THE PLATEAU ABOVE THE WADI, THE TWO BRITISH SERGEANTS, BERT RANDALL AND JULIAN TORRANCE, WERE PEERING INTO THE GLOOM...
I TELL YOU I CAN SEE SOMETHING MOVING DOWN THERE.
YOU'RE LETTING YOUR IMAGINATION RUN AWAY WITH YOU. YOU'VE GOT THE JITTERS.

RANDALL CHOSE TO BACK HIS JUDGMENT... WITH A SQUIRT OF SLUGS FROM HIS TOMMY-GUN, A MINE WENT OFF... AS FINGERS ENGAGED IN A TRICKY TASK BUNGLED THE JOB WITH CALAMITOUS RESULTS FOR ONE GROUP OF COMBAT ENGINEERS...
GOT THE JITTERS, HAVE I?

OTHER BRITISH GUNS STUTTERED OUT, LACING THE DARKNESS OF THE WADI WITH STREAMS OF LEAD. THE GERMANS FLED IN CONFUSION...

AT FIRST LIGHT, PANZERS LUNGED AGAINST THE ESCARPMENT ITSELF IN AN ATTEMPT TO STORM THE PLATEAU. THEY WERE UNCHALLENGED UNTIL THEIR HULLS LIFTED ABOVE THE RIM. THEN A HURRICANE OF SHELLS BLASTED INTO THEM...
THAT WAS THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF ASSAULTS SPREAD OVER A WEEK OF BITTER FIGHTING. THE FURY OF THE DEFENSIVE FIRE BROKE THEM, BUT DAY BY DAY THE FENSHIRES' STRENGTH WAS WHITTLED DOWN. THE TANKS COMMANDED BY TORRANCE AND RANDALL WERE AMONG THOSE KNOCKED OUT.
OVER THIS WAY, TORRANCE! I'VE COPPED A PACKET IN THE ARM BUT I CAN STILL GIVE YOU A HAND!

TOGETHER THE TWO SERGEANTS MADE FOR THE REGIMENTAL AID POST... SOLE SURVIVORS OF THEIR CREWS. THEY WERE THERE WHEN HANFORD VISITED IT, AS HE ALWAYS DID DURING A LULL IN THE BATTLE.
I DON'T GIVE A HOOT WHAT YOU SAY, DOC... I'M STILL FIT ENOUGH TO DO MY STUFF!
AND IF HE'S GOING BACK, SO AM I!

GUY HANFORD WATCHED THEM STUMBLE OFF TOGETHER, HEADING BACK TOWARDS THE BATTLE-FRONT TO REPORT TO THEIR SQUADRON-COMMANDER. OTHERS FOLLOWED, AND HANFORD CHOKED MOMENTARILY ON A LUMP THAT ROSE IN HIS THROAT...
BRAVE MEN, DOC... IT MAKES ME PROUD TO BE THEIR COLONEL. PROUD... AND A LITTLE HUMBLE...
I KNOW JUST HOW YOU FEEL, GUY.

THERE WERE PLACES FOR THOSE RETURNING CASUALTIES IN THE DEPLETED SQUADRONS. THEY HAD BEEN RE-MUSTERED INTO SERVICEABLE TANKS WHEN THE NEXT PANZER ATTACK WAS MOUNTED... AN ATTACK WITH A DIFFERENCE, FOR THE WADI CAME IN FOR ATTENTION ONCE MORE.

BEFORE THE NAZI FLAIL-TANK COULD FULFIL ITS ROLE, A CRUSADER SWEPT DOWN INTO THE WADI. IT CARRIED A MIXED CREW OF EX-INFANTRYMEN AND TWO OF THE ORIGINAL FENSHIRES... AND IT CAME INSTANTLY UNDER A MURDEROUS FIRE...

THE CRUSADER ROARED ONWARD THROUGH THE TORRENT OF SHELLS. IT WAS GOUGED IN HALF-A-DOZEN PLACES AND WAS ABLAZE WITH A DEAD CREW INSIDE IT WHEN IT RAMMED THE GERMAN FLAIL-TANK AND BLEW IT UP.
THE WADI WAS BLOCKED WITH MANGLED WRECKAGE. THE THRUST IN THAT QUARTER HAD FAILED AND ALONG THE ESCARPMENT THE MAIN GERMAN ONSLAUGHT WAS SMASHED... THOUGH AT DESPERATE COST...
THEY'VE FINALLY GIVEN UP, COLONEL. THEY'RE TRACKING NORTH.
YES, MIKE. WE'VE WHIPPED 'EM. IT WAS TOUCH AND GO — AND WE'RE JUST ABOUT AT THE END OF OUR TETHER. STILL, WE'VE WHIPPED THEM!

THE EFFECTIVE STRENGTH OF THE REGIMENT HAD BEEN REDUCED TO EIGHT TANKS. WEARILY, THEIR CREWS DESCENDED FROM THEM, DISHEVELLED, UNSHAVEN, CLOSE TO EXHAUSTION. AND THAT WAS HOW SAM COLLINS FOUND THEM WHEN HIS STAFF CAR BROUGHT HIM ALONGSIDE HANFORD'S CRUSADER...

GOOD HEAVENS, HANFORD, IS THIS ALL THAT'S LEFT OF YOUR UNIT?

YES, SIR, WE'VE JUST ABOUT HAD IT... BUT THE ENEMY HAS PULLED OUT... AND FOR KEEPS! ALL'S QUIET ON THIS SECTOR NOW.

THE BRIG REMEMBERED THE CRITICISMS HE HAD MADE AGAINST THE FENSHIRES...

COLONEL HANFORD, YOU AND YOUR MEN HAVE DONE MORE THAN ANYONE COULD HAVE DEMANDED. BUT I'VE GOT TO ASK STILL MORE OF YOU... WE'RE STAGING A COUNTER-OFFENSIVE IN THE NORTH. MY ORDERS ARE TO SUPPORT IT BY SWITCHING EVERY TANK I CAN SPARE TO THE DIVISION'S RIGHT FLANK.

HE COULD NOT HAVE BLAMED THESE DRAINED AND HAGGARD MEN IF THEY HAD RAISED THEIR VOICES IN MUTINOUS PROTEST. BUT THERE WAS NO PROTEST. THEY LISTENED AS HE GAVE DETAILS OF THEIR MOVE INTO THE NORTHERN BATTLE. THEN THEY WALKED TO THEIR CRUSADERS... STOICALLY... STEADFASTLY...

NOT LONG AGO I WANTED TO SEE HANFORD'S CROWD DISBANDED. NOW THE GERMANS HAVE COME CLOSE TO DOING IT FOR ME, BUT I'LL BUILD THE FENSHIRES UP TO STRENGTH AGAIN AND KEEP THEIR NAME ALIVE. BY HEAVENS, I WILL! THAT MUCH I OWE THEM...

HE WATCHED THEM SET OUT ACROSS THE PLATEAU... THE PITIFUL REMNANTS OF AN EXCLUSIVE REGIMENT. NO, NOT ANY LONGER AN EXCLUSIVE REGIMENT, BUT ONE IN WHICH MEN FROM VASTLY DIFFERENT WALKS OF LIFE HAD LEARNED COMRADESHIP AMID THE LEVELLING PROCESSES OF BATTLE...

MAYBE THERE WAS A HINT OF MOISTURE IN THE BRIG'S EYES AS HE GAZED AFTER THE LAST OF THE FENSHIRE LIGHT HORSE... MAYBE... BUT HE WOULD NEVER HAVE CONFESSED TO IT...

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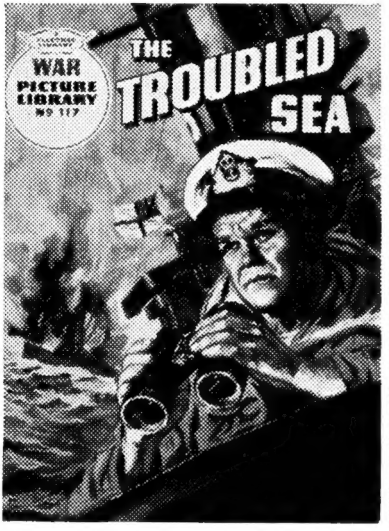

Some men deserve to die—Kapitan Kurt Wolf of U-boat 97 was such a man !

No. 118.—HEAT OF BATTLE

A scratch guncrew on a solitary Bofors matched against an enemy flushed with victory.

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